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Confronting Congress

Reagan's new team faces a fresh congressional lineup.

For much of its first term, the Reagan administration provided a textbook lesson in congressional relations. Now—at a critical juncture for several major initiatives—the Reagan team will consist largely of new faces or old faces in new places. And Congress itself will have a different cast. Some House and Senate veterans will assume new responsibilities at the helms of the key committees that will confront such complex issues as deficit reduction, tax reform, defense spending and “covert” operations in Nicaragua. Among the new leaders:

Sen. David Durenberger: The Minnesota Republican, now chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, is soft-spoken, reflective and cautious. The outgoing chairman, Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater, is brash, outspoken and caustic. So the most immediate change with Durenberger at the helm will be stylistic. “Durenberger will do what he does quietly,” says one Intelligence Committee staffer.

What he will actually do is far more open to question. On the first major issue confronting his committee—the administration proposal for continued aid to rebels opposing the Sandinista government in Nicaragua—Durenberger's record provides few clues. Even he concedes that “it looks like I've been on all sides of this thing.” And in fact he has, opposing the covert operation at first, but reversing himself in September 1983 to vote for the aid. Disclosure last year that the CIA had been involved in mining Nicaraguan harbors angered him: “Indiscriminate use of mining gives people around the world the opportunity to say Ronald Reagan is crazy,” he said. The House has repeatedly rejected additional funds for the contras, and Durenberger appears ready to buck the White House, too. The aid, he says, is “helping to destroy the [congressional] oversight process” by undermining public confidence in covert operations.

At the very least, Durenberger intends to scrutinize CIA activities. He is no fan of William Casey, having described the CIA director in a recent Minneapolis Star Tribune interview as a “2 on a scale of 10.” Still, Durenberger says he has no intention of taking on Casey directly by seeking his resignation. “I told [Casey] I didn't hire him,” he said. “I wasn't going to try to get him fired.”

Durenberger is anxious to concentrate on what he considers Intelligence's prime task: establishing control over U.S. intelligence activities. He is not enthusiastic about proposals that his committee investigate matters such as alleged atrocities by the contras in Nicaragua or reports that U.S. aid to rebels in Afghanistan is being misappropriated. “The headline business . . . is not my idea of what the committee ought to be,” Durenberger told The Washington Post. “If we spend the next two years investigating Afghanistan and the contras, we aren't going to get the job done that we are expected to do.”

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